



Two votes to override

U.S. REP. CANDICE MILLER: Veto of national water project funding endangers the health of the Great Lakes

November 6, 2007

BY U.S. REP. CANDICE MILLER

There is nothing more important to the identity and economy of the state of Michigan than our magnificent Great Lakes. And now our lakes face significant challenges that threaten their health today and for future generations.

We are experiencing historically low water levels that reduce the amount of cargo that freighters can carry, which is putting serious strain on our industrial economy. These low levels also disrupt local recreational harbors that are critical to tourism, another vital part of the Michigan economy. In addition, we have seen numerous invasive species enter our lakes and threaten the delicate ecosystem.

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Enough is enough. It's time for every public official and citizen to stand up to protect our Great Lakes.

This year, Congress worked together in a bipartisan fashion to pass the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA). As a member of the Water Resources subcommittee of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, which crafted the House version of the bill, I was very pleased that this bipartisan cooperation allowed for the inclusion of several provisions that will have a positive impact on the Great Lakes.

First, the bill authorizes \$20 million in federal funding to implement the recommendations of the Lake St. Clair and St. Clair River Management Plan. This funding would allow us to tackle many of the challenges faced by these critical waterways, including damage caused by invasive species and continuing pollution, which contributes to beach closures and contamination of our drinking water. These are issues I have been fighting for since my election to Congress.

Also, the bill authorizes the construction of an electronic fence at the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal to keep the Asian carp out of the Great Lakes. This dangerous invasive species could wreak havoc on fisheries.

In addition, this bill authorizes funding for a pilot program to stop the spread of viral hemorrhagic septicemia, which is a horrible Ebola-like virus that has infected great numbers of the fish within the lakes. Stopping its spread is critical to the future health of our fisheries.

I was extremely disappointed that President George W. Bush decided to veto this bill. He did so because he believes it spends too much money. While I agree that we need to reduce overall federal spending, I also believe there are plenty of other places in the federal budget to cut that do not impact needed protections for our environment, most importantly our Great Lakes.

Fighting low lake levels, protecting against invasive species and stopping the spread of diseases in our waters is not wasteful spending; it is a vital investment.

Over the past few years Michigan taxpayers have spent hundreds of millions -- if not billions -- of our tax dollars to aid victims of disaster in places such as New Orleans because proper funding was not given to shore up levees, coastal areas and other critical infrastructure. This bill will also provide funds to do just that, so hopefully we will not have to again spend billions when the next storm hits. One has to wonder if the federal government had not waited so long to reauthorize WRDA whether some of the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina could have been avoided.

The prudent funding put in place by WRDA will allow us to mitigate against a potential disaster here at home brought on by the continuing decline in water levels or the decimation of fisheries. This is especially important not just because of the economic impact, but also because the Great Lakes supply the drinking water to tens of millions of people in the Great Lakes basin and represent fully 20% of the fresh surface water of the entire planet.

In this case, an ounce of prevention is far preferable to a pound of cure. That is why I will continue to fight to get the federal funding our Great Lakes need and deserve. It is also why I am committed to override President Bush's veto and help this important legislation become law.

U.S. REP. CANDICE MILLER, R-Harrison Township, represents Michigan's 10th congressional district. Write to her in care of the Free Press Editorial Page, 615 W. Lafayette, Detroit, MI 48226 or at oped@freepress.com.

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U.S. REP. SANDER LEVIN

Better to address lake threats now than respond to catastrophe later

November 6, 2007

BY U.S. REP. SANDER LEVIN

President George W. Bush just vetoed a major water infrastructure bill critical to the health of the Great Lakes and other water resources around the country. This veto demonstrates that the White House has not learned any lesson from past catastrophes that occurred when infrastructure needs were ignored.

Three months ago, the I-35W Mississippi River bridge collapsed in Minneapolis. Two years ago, the levee system in New Orleans failed during Hurricane Katrina, putting 80% of the city under water. At this moment, the city of Atlanta is running out of water as a result of exceptional drought and explosive population growth.

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In each of these disasters, there were warning signs that went unheeded. In each case, there was a failure of critical infrastructure. In Minneapolis and New Orleans, key infrastructure was not adequately maintained, and in Atlanta, the needed infrastructure was never built.

Another kind of infrastructure failure is threatening Michigan's most precious natural resource: our Great Lakes. The warning signs are apparent, but some people fail to see -- or choose to ignore -- the danger.

While the lakes have made a remarkable comeback over the last 35 years since the Clean Water Act became law, scientists warn that a combination of historical sources of environmental stress have combined with new threats to the lakes, potentially leading to ecosystem breakdown. For example, a large, oxygen-starved "dead zone" opens up each summer in Lake Erie. Like a canary in a coal mine, this is a sign that all is not well.

Damaging aquatic invasive species arrive in the lakes at a rate of one every eight months. One particular aquatic invasive species -- the Asian carp -- poses an especially menacing threat and is literally sitting at the lakes' back door. The carp would devastate the Great Lakes fishery and destroy the ecosystem if it ever enters the lakes. The only thing keeping the Great Lakes safe is an electronic barrier in the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal. But the current barrier is only a stopgap measure; it was never intended to be permanent. Closer to my own congressional district, Lake St. Clair continues to experience beach closings, loss of wetlands, and damage from aquatic invasive species like the zebra mussel.

President Bush vetoed the Water Resources Development Act, which Congress recently approved. It called for \$23 billion in water infrastructure investments across the country, including funds to build a permanent electronic barrier in Chicago to keep the Asian carp out of the Great Lakes. The legislation also contains a provision I helped author that calls for up to \$20 million to carry out restoration projects

in Lake St. Clair over the next several years.

The investment to protect our Great Lakes now makes fiscal sense. Ultimately, the price tag for the critical investments called for in the Water Resources Development Act will not become any cheaper if we put them off. On the contrary, as we've seen in Minneapolis, New Orleans and Atlanta, the cost of fixing a disaster is often many times greater than investing wisely to prevent the problem. Our choice is clear: Prioritize spending now to keep our lakes protected, or likely face huge costs later -- when irreversible damage to the Great Lakes may have already been done.

The Great Lakes are a unique treasure, but they will not survive if we ignore warning signs and fail to make the investments needed to protect them.

U.S. REP. SANDER LEVIN, D-Royal Oak, represents Michigan's 12th congressional district. Write to him in care of the Free Press Editorial Page, 615 W. Lafayette, Detroit, MI 48226 or at oped@freepress.com.

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